

## Denis Diderot, "The Philosophe" (1750s)

*While Americans of modest means were turning to emotional religion, much of the educated upper class were adopting the world view of the European Enlightenment, the belief that human reason by itself, without any revelation from the heavens, could unlock the secrets of the universe and guide the improvement, even the perfection, of humanity and society.*

*Denis Diderot who wrote the following selection in the mid-18th century, was a French Enlightenment philosopher. Enlightenment thinkers often referred to themselves as "philosophes," and in Diderot's The Philosophe, he discusses Enlightenment thinking and what distinguishes it from the thinking of previous eras. The works of Diderot and other European philosophes had a profound effect on the way learned Americans thought during the 18th century.*

Other men make up their minds to act without thinking, nor are they conscious of the causes which move them.... The philosophe, on the contrary, distinguishes the causes to what extent he may.... Reason is the estimation of the philosophe what grace is to the Christian. Grace determines the Christian's action; reason the philosophe's.

Other men are carried away by passions, so that acts which they produce do not proceed from reflection. These are men who move in darkness; while the philosophe, even in his passions, moves only after reflection. He marches at night, but a torch goes on ahead.

The philosophe forms his principles upon an infinity of individual observations.... The philosophe takes the maxim at its source, he examines its origin, he knows its real value, and only makes use of it, if it seems to him satisfactory.

Truth is not for the philosophe a mistress who vitiates his imagination.... [He] takes for true that which is true, for false that which is false, for doubtful that which is doubtful, and for probable that which is only probable. He does more and this is the great perfection of the philosophe; that when he has no real grounds for passing judgment, he knows how to remain undetermined.

The world is full of persons... who always pass judgment. They are guessing always, because it is guessing to pass judgment without knowing when one has proper grounds for judgment.... The philosophe believes that [understanding] consists in judging well: he is better pleased with himself when he has suspended the faculty of determining, that if he had determined before having acquired proper grounds for decision....

The [Enlightenment] spirit is then a spirit of observation and exactness, which refers everything to true principles....

Man is not a monster, made to live only at the bottom of the sea or in the depths of the forest; the very necessities of life render intercourse with others necessary; and in whatsoever state we find him, his needs and his well-being lead him to live in society....

Our philosophe does not believe himself in exile in the world.... He wishes to find his pleasure with others... so he seeks to harmonize with those with whom chance or his choice has determined he shall live....